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Utopian Studies, Volume 21, Number 1, 2010, pp. 24-56 (Article)



Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/utp.0.0014>

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# Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. Le Guin

CHRISTINE NADIR

## Abstract

This article examines the concept of the “education of desire,” which undergirds literary utopian studies’ response to postmodernism’s challenge to the modern utopian impulse. The analysis returns to two classic utopian texts—the work of Miguel Abensour, who coined the term “education of desire,” and Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel about ecological sustainability, “The Dispossessed”—to argue that the education of desire involves a more intimate relationship between desire and domination than literary utopian studies has allowed. This article not only transforms our understanding of a mainstay of utopian studies; it relates this discussion to utopian strains in environmental thought, tracing the tension between the desire for ecological sustainability and the social, political, and economic prescriptions this would entail.

Fredric Jameson opens *Archaeologies of the Future* with an acknowledgment that the literary value of his subject, utopian science fiction, “is subject to permanent doubt” and its “political status is structurally ambiguous.”<sup>1</sup> Disclaimers like Jameson’s are commonplace in contemporary literary utopian studies. The field’s scholarship is defined by repeated defenses against the postmodernist criticism that utopian literature depicts authoritarian societies that dominate their subjects. To rescue utopia from this legacy, or to defend it from this charge, many scholars argue that modern utopian literature no longer espouses perfectible political and economic blueprints. Instead, they insist, works written in the past century and a half dwell on the most basic impulse underlying political change: the inspirational dream of an improved, alternative world. As Tom Moylan writes, utopian literature does not seek to determine its readers’ visions of the future; rather, it “serves to stimulate in its readers a *desire for a better life* and to motivate that desire toward action by conveying a sense that the world is not fixed once and for all.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether this scholarship marks a radical break in utopian literary production or a shift in degree remains unclear, but what is consistent is the use of a discourse of desire and desire education to articulate the transformation. Jameson's encyclopedic *Archaeologies* is subtitled "The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions," which comes from his description of utopia, in an earlier work, "as a kind of desiring to desire, a *learning to desire*, the invention of the desire called utopia in the first place."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Ruth Levitas, who has been integral to the development of utopian studies as a field, opens and concludes *The Concept of Utopia*, her overview of twentieth-century utopian thought, by defining utopia as "the desire for a better way of being."<sup>4</sup> And the concept of the "education of desire" appears in her work in two capacities: as a definition of utopia and as a term from which to distinguish her calls for utopian hope. In his survey of utopian literature from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, *Narrating Utopia*, Chris Ferns argues that the genre's "purpose . . . has become less the advocacy of specific alternative sociopolitical formations, and more the stimulus and *education of desire*."<sup>5</sup> For literary utopian studies, the desire discourse reflects modern utopias' move away from totalizing blueprints and toward open-ended, self-reflexive, provisional world-making. According to this logic, if utopian blueprints are challenged, incomplete, or ambiguous, then desire is free, desire is being educated, or one is learning to desire. Utopia, then, becomes a gesture, a feeling, or a motivation that awakens longing, and utopian literature is exonerated from claims that it seeks to dominate the imagination through a set of political rules.

This essay revisits two classic utopian texts that, I argue, suggest a more intimate relationship between desire and domination. First, I turn to the long-lost origins of the "education of desire" in the work of French political philosopher Miguel Abensour, who coined the term in 1973. Whereas utopian studies routinely treats desire as a latent yet absolutely unfixed and liberatory power when properly educated, Abensour understands desire as a space of both liberatory potential and profound vulnerability. Desire can be reduced to a single object or channeled into a single path, or desire can be a positive force of unrestricted ethical and political imagination if it is deterritorialized. For Abensour, though, desire's two courses are not as separable as they are in contemporary literary utopian studies. In fact, they intertwine at all times. To educate desire, then, is to teach how utopian longing can itself

lead to new forms of domination as desire is arranged and rearranged, again and again, by power and discourse. In his works, this dynamic is called the dialectic of emancipation.

Second, I examine how a classic work of utopian literature, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), further complicates the education of desire by placing its utopia in the context of ecological scarcity. To survive on the barely livable landscape of the planet Anarres, the novel's utopian society must regulate the consumption of natural resources and condition every inhabitant to live a life of minimalist simplicity. Every political, aesthetic, and personal decision seems to be guided by an ethic of environmental sacrifice. In contrast to the utopian studies opposition between blueprint and the education of desire, *The Dispossessed* presents its readers with a constant negotiation between, on the one hand, freedoms of thought, expression, and desire and, on the other, the programmed sacrifices necessary for ecological survival. Although touted by critics as a work that educates desire, presumably stimulating aspirations for a better life, the Anarresti utopia, I argue, shows how this very impulse can be exploited in order to obscure the erosion of freedom.

### **Miguel Abensour, Utopian Studies, and the Education of Desire**

A philosopher of some renown in France and beyond, Abensour succeeded Jean-François Lyotard as president of the Collège International de Philosophie from 1985 to 1987, and the resurgence of French political philosophy in recent decades has been credited, in part, to his work.<sup>6</sup> In 1976, his concept of the "education of desire" was brought to the attention of Anglo-American utopian studies when some lines from his 1973 doctoral dissertation were translated by E. P. Thompson for a *New Left Review* article on William Morris's *News From Nowhere*. In "Romanticism, Moralism, and Utopianism: The Case of William Morris," Thompson summarizes Abensour's conclusion that a shift occurred in European utopian literature after 1848, the year in which Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* was published and revolutions broke out across Europe. At this historical moment, Abensour argues, utopian literature moved away from outlining systematic blueprints of perfect societies and toward what he calls a "new utopian spirit" and the "education of desire." Two years later, Raymond Williams cited Thompson's research, referencing Abensour's work in his influential "Utopia and Science Fiction,"

even devoting a section, “Systematic and Heuristic Futures,” to explaining the education of desire. In 1980, Williams’s essay was collected in his *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, ensuring that future generations of utopian studies and SF critics would readily encounter Abensour’s argument. From these traces, the phrase “education of desire” and the contrasting of systematic and heuristic utopian modes entered the work of prominent utopian studies figures. However, this scholarship adopts understandings of desire, education, and utopia that contradict those in Abensour’s actual work. In fact, as we shall see, in Anglo-American utopian studies, the name “Abensour” and the expression “education of desire” have come to function as catch-all phrases that critics invest with their hopes for an expedient answer to the complex ethical and political questions posed by postmodernist criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike contemporary literary utopian studies, Abensour is not concerned with simply identifying imperfections in literary utopias. His work nowhere suggests that imperfect utopias automatically accomplish heuristic projects in that they educate and stimulate desire just because they avoid sociopolitical blueprints. Rather, his abiding concern is with why—and how—utopian impulses give way to dystopian outcomes, especially in the context of modernity, when even a cursory glance at the past century, or even the last decade, reveals the most emancipatory of promises leading to violence and authoritarianism. Building on critical theory such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Abensour’s theory of utopia originates in an understanding of modernity as a dialectic of emancipation, which he defines as “the paradoxical movement by which modern emancipation overturns into its opposite, giving birth to new forms of domination and oppression—to barbarity—in spite of the emancipatory intentionality from which it starts.”<sup>8</sup> Abensour argues that since 1848 literature has set itself to work on this “paradoxical movement,” creating a “new utopian spirit” that meditates on the fissures within modern utopian claims. This spirit, Abensour writes, “has as its task, once it has located the blind spots that carry out the reversal of modern emancipation, to inhabit them and engage in the work of deconstruction and critique so that a new path opens for utopia.”<sup>9</sup> New utopian works ask: What are the mechanisms by which utopian promises of progress and freedom are transformed into forces of domination?

Although contemporary literary utopian studies agrees with Abensour that utopia need not be a perfect society, scholars tend to pass over the

deconstructive work performed by the new utopian spirit. In Abensour's account, utopia is not a place, a state, or a society. Nor is utopia an innocuous gesture or impulse beyond critique. Rather, utopia is a restlessness occupying every text (literary or otherwise), unsettling any "good" society's most subtle laws. In literature, Abensour writes, the new utopian spirit communicates "no ideal plan for the moral education of humanity"; instead, it provides a stage to critique the modern dialectic of emancipation, inhabiting the always-present moments that collapse promises of freedom into new forms of control. By planting the seeds of its own dissolution, utopia navigates a space of undecidability between emancipation and domination, thereby refusing its own tendency to settle into a fixed form. As a result, the literary utopia achieves a key deconstructive task: it will "[know] how and [be] able to resist the dialectic of emancipation—the reversal of emancipation into its opposite."<sup>10</sup>

Wedding his writing on utopia to his political philosophy, Abensour explains that the new utopian spirit is essential to the democratic imagination: "One of the essential questions of modernity . . . [is how] to democratize utopia . . . and utopianize [*utopianiser*] democracy."<sup>11</sup> Dissociated from one authoritative vision, utopia opens to an infinite number of voices and troubles the false sense of confidence that any society labeled "democratic" is all freedom and no force. In his reading of *News From Nowhere*, which became so significant to utopian studies' response to postmodernist criticism, Abensour demonstrates how the utopian and democratic imaginations, joined together, educate desire. His reading begins by de-emphasizing utopian "themes" or "doctrines." This move initially appears consistent with contemporary utopian studies' preference for open-ended "processes" and "impulses" as opposed to concretized "content" or "representations."<sup>12</sup> However, Abensour does not privilege gesture over narrative form as utopian studies often does. Instead, he studies the interaction (rather than the opposition) between, on the one hand, the formal laws of the text's utopian society and, on the other hand, the ways that the text might actually break these rules, unexpectedly destabilizing and awakening the reader's desire without prescribing a particular plan. In other words, for Abensour, *News From Nowhere*, as text, is at play with the utopian society it depicts.

Morris, according to Abensour, initiated this utopian-democratic play by publishing *News From Nowhere* over ten months in 1890 in the radical British periodical *Commonweal*. Serialization was a popular form of literary

commodification in the nineteenth century, but the choice of a revolutionary journal read by the Socialist League solicited especially lively responses from readers (*Commonweal*-reading socialists), who were specifically concerned with the novel's subject matter (socialist revolution and utopia). The result: "the reader is invited to participate in the act of writing utopia . . . [and] encouraged to propose [his or her] own utopia." Morris's socialist critics do not applaud his utopia's imperfection, content with any expression of utopian impulse; rather, these *Commonweal* readers, in Abensour's view, "take a step beyond the written word" by articulating problems, arguing for alternatives, and continually undoing the formal power of the literary narrative: "Written utopia is no longer a closed totality that one must take or leave, but is instead a sort of lateral play . . . that by and through the intervals it opens, draws more and more players into active participation." By relinquishing its authority and opening the structurally closed form of the utopian narrative as book through a dialogic relationship with its most critical readers, *News From Nowhere* welcomes "instantaneous, ephemeral, and unstable" counterfocalizations in such a way that its utopian socialist vision immediately becomes the subject of critique on a stage of its own making, a stage where desire is repeatedly arranged and rearranged by dialogue and deconstruction: "The subjectivity of the narrator's desire rebounds and draws the desire of the recipients, inviting them in turn to envision the new life at the moment they are reading about it, thereby establishing a two way movement of feelings and desires." What could have remained "monological" in form becomes "open and pluridimensional."<sup>13</sup> A text that could have remained closed opens itself to other disseminations. Through its form—through its serialization and its intended audience—*News From Nowhere* pulls the rug out from under its own utopia.

This provocation of unpredictable reaction restores utopia to its "veritable dimension," that is, the "education of desire," which Abensour defines in the following way: "The point is not for utopia . . . to assign 'true' or 'just' goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it. Not to assign it a goal to desire but to open a path for it." Abensour continues—and this is the sentence that Thompson immortalized: "Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all *to desire otherwise*."<sup>14</sup> The last phrase—"to desire otherwise" (*à désirer autrement*)—was originally translated by Thompson in 1976 as "to desire in a different way." The French adverb *autrement* has no direct counterpart in English, so Thompson

approximated with the adverb phrase “in a different way”—a fine choice. However, like all translations, some original nuance is lost. “In a different way” sounds more limited than *autrement*. The single number of “a way” suggests that there may be only one other way that Abensour has in mind, and in fact, this is how the concepts of utopia and the education of desire are often employed in literary utopian studies. Moylan’s definition of utopia, for example, implies that one settles for utopia as the “desire for a better life” because this singular alternative way has not been found. Note the singleness of the solution: “In the absence of *a radical theoretical discourse yet to be developed*, this figural anticipation of what could not yet be conceptualized is the driving impulse of the [utopian] genre itself. . . . It can *only* offer itself as an activity which opens human imagination beyond the present limits.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Abensour’s utopia is not a stand-in for a forthcoming discourse or conceptualization (however radical) that claims to know a plan for a better or perfect society. Instead, the “new utopia . . . [creates] a critical relation to the *dialectic of emancipation* in modernity.”<sup>16</sup> It dislocates utopian promises before they settle into authoritative blueprints and political models and points out how such claims to knowledge withhold from the imagination alternative ways of being. For this reason, Max Blechman’s translation above captures the infinite possibilities of utopia’s education of desire more completely: “Desire must be taught . . . to desire otherwise.” Education here is figured through a command (“desire *must be* taught”), but it is an imperative toward process without destination, dreaming without program.

Despite its attraction to Abensour’s vocabulary of plurality, democracy, and especially the education of desire, literary utopian studies has failed to engage the critique of modernity and the dialectic of emancipation permeating his work. This leads to argumentation full of incongruities. Simply put, this scholarship paradoxically calls upon a postmodernist lexicon (like Abensour’s) in order to reject postmodernist analyses of utopia (again, like Abensour’s). I will demonstrate how this works with an example, but first a brief description of postmodernism’s problem with utopia—or the modern utopian impulse to be exact.

In *Utopia Limited*, Marianne DeKoven explains that postmodernism targets utopia’s embeddedness in “modernity’s teleological master narrative of Enlightenment, [in which] superstition will give way to reason and science, which have the potential to solve all human problems, to produce steady,



unidirectional upward progress, and ultimately to lead to utopia.” (Both Abensour and contemporary literary utopian studies agree that twentieth-century utopian literature has distanced itself from this goal.) The modern utopian impulse, DeKoven continues, “become[s] . . . a force of domination, when allied with modernity’s dominant bourgeois capitalist class, in the form of the Cartesian cogito, or the separation of the knowing self from, and master of, the objectified, reified Other.”<sup>17</sup> The utopian faith that science and rationality will lead to perfection involves the management of this “perfect” populace and the suppression of nonconforming “others” who pose obstacles to the inevitable march of progress. Here lies the difference between Abensour and contemporary literary utopian studies: Abensour believes that the movement between progress and domination will be a perennial problem within modern society, while utopian studies tends to leave this critical discussion entirely behind in order to embrace utopian literature’s redemption through the education of desire.

In an article overviewing contemporary skepticism of utopia, Levitas demonstrates this critical tendency. To discredit accounts such as DeKoven’s, Levitas calls on Abensour’s terminology, using words such as *systematic*, *heuristic*, *desire*, and *education* gathered from Thompson’s brief translation. Levitas’s instinct to fall back on Abensour’s theoretical apparatus in order to discredit postmodernist dismissals of utopia could have been a strategic move: Abensour’s work could very well be presented as an antidote to claims that the modern utopian impulse only ever constitutes a force of domination since, as we have seen, the new utopian spirit proposes that a dialectic exists between desire and domination. However, this is not the way that Levitas uses Abensour’s vocabulary. Instead, she falls back on his words in order to position utopia entirely beyond the dangers of domination, sociopolitical blueprints, the dialectic of emancipation, and the modern totalizing impulse altogether. In other words, she calls on Abensour to support an argument that his work would oppose. After describing how late capitalist society rejects utopia as a totalizing vision, Levitas argues:

A move from representation to process has marked both [literary and critical] texts and the way in which utopia is understood (as, in Miguel Abensour’s terms, *heuristic rather than systematic*). . . . The shift to a greater pluralism,

provisionality and reflexivity in the substance of utopia has been paralleled by a theorisation of utopia which treats it as *heuristic rather than telic* . . . focus[ing] on *process rather than content*. . . . Abensour, for example, argues for understanding the function of utopian texts in terms of desire, not expressively or instrumentally in the sense of desire for the object portrayed in the text, but in terms of how the text acts on the act of desiring.<sup>18</sup>

Abensour's argument is distorted here. Abensour *is* interested in how the utopian text "acts on the act of desiring," but this is not because desire is the panacea for the modern impulse to "systematize" utopia; rather, desire, for him, *can be*—but this is not necessarily the case—a critical relation to the systematic and telic content that is always present any time the term *utopia* is circulated. Levitas's deployment of Abensour's framework transforms this dialectic between domination and emancipation into a separation of opposites—marked by her series of "rather thans": "heuristic *rather than* systematic," "heuristic *rather than* telic," "process *rather than* content." Abensour created these terms, but as we saw in his approach to Morris, the systematic, telic, and authoritarian are not thrown aside in his literary reading; instead, utopian narratives act as self-deconstructive stages, exposing the seeds of repression contained in the claims to knowledge and power that operate within promises of freedom and progress. In the next section, I show how Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed* is especially suited to an exploration of how the most well-intentioned utopian strivings can transform into oppressive systems in utopian literature—a transformation that, given this work's concern with ecological scarcity, implicates environmentalism as well.

### **Desire, Domination, and the Dialectic of Emancipation in *The Dispossessed***

In *The Dispossessed*, the utopia, Anarres, is located on a planet of extreme ecological scarcity. In this fragile state, two mechanisms of social control ensure the collective survival of its inhabitants: the Production and Distribution Coordination (the PDC), an institution managing natural resources, and an all-pervasive ideology of sacrifice, based on the work of a philosopher

named Laia Odo and calling for austerity in every facet of existence. This sociopolitical structure produces both the possibility and the impossibility of freedom. Odo's philosophy and the PDC provide a precarious community with the ideological concepts and the material resources necessary for ecological emancipation.<sup>19</sup> However, these same forces simultaneously obstruct freedom because people, their aspirations, and their habits must be managed according to nature's limits. In the context of such a dearth of resources, restrictions on human behavior indirectly enable desire because there would be no desire whatsoever—in fact, there would be no life—if the Anarresti population could not conduct itself in such a way as to make its territory habitable. Pervading *The Dispossessed's* utopia, then, is a necessarily mediated coexistence of political blueprint and the freedom of desire. Not only does this work's focus on ecology challenge literary utopian studies' separation of the education of desire from systematic blueprints, it also complicates Abensour's assertion that desire unsettles the laws of every so-called good society in order to prevent the overturning of emancipation into domination. If the task of the new utopian spirit is to locate when and where utopia freezes into a fixed form, how are we to proceed when this very fixity literally makes culture, even survival, possible? How does a sustainable society educate open-ended desire when desires must be arranged by ecological necessity? How does *The Dispossessed*, as a 1970s green utopian literary text, stimulate readers' longing for a better world in the context of crisis?

To date, utopian studies readings of *The Dispossessed* contain two key oversights. First, they do not take ecology seriously. As a result, they gloss over the way in which Anarres's habitat mediates and governs desire in the work. Second, their uneasy, contradictory relationships to postmodernism result in the same types of logical incongruities evident in Levitas's casual adoption of Abensour's vocabulary discussed above. Eager to prove that utopia (both literary and otherwise) is not an authoritative project, critics often fall into the trap of prematurely celebrating Anarres, reading its defects as a sign that definitive blueprints have been displaced by "anti-utopian possibilities," "difference and imperfection," future "conditionality," and "unresolved oppositions and multiple points of view."<sup>20</sup> But it is not enough to identify *The Dispossessed's* internal contradictions and disagreements as ends in and of themselves. Stopping one's analysis at the fact that Anarres is imperfect fails to deal with how this utopia poses tension between desire and domination,

between freedom and oppression. The text's ecological emancipation amid a stifling bureaucracy is not simply a flight from authoritative models of political progress; it is an exploration of how—or even if—desire could be independent of blueprints, especially in a world defined by environmental crises. One could even say that *The Dispossessed* “greens” Abensour’s new utopian spirit. Whereas the new utopian spirit exposes the “blind spots” that transform promises of emancipation into dystopias, Le Guin’s novel offers a theory as to how this metamorphosis can occur in an environmental context. *The Dispossessed* examines how the forms of discourse, knowledge, and power that propose a sustainable, equitable society also restrict freedoms of thought and desire—emancipating, in other words, while dominating at the same time.

Although its treatment in utopian studies scholarship sometimes suggests otherwise, postmodernism’s primary concern is not to destroy the ethico-political imagination. Central to this theoretical school is an emphasis on the inescapability of forces of domination in the constitution of desire. Again, where there is opposition in utopian studies there is relation in postmodernist theory. While utopian studies tends to place desire and domination in unrelated realms as Levitas’s work demonstrates, postmodernism posits their intertwining—to both positive and negative effect. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism’s distinguishing feature is its “commitment to doubleness, or duplicity,” conditions that sound conceptually similar to utopian studies’ emphasis on ambiguity and imperfection. What differs, though, is that this duality involves what Hutcheon terms “complicitous critique.” Much as Abensour’s new utopian spirit operates deconstructively within the laws of any utopian claim, critique in Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodernism is “bound up . . . with its own *complicity* with power and domination”; it “acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine.” Aware that it depends on the very structures it aims to break down, “postmodern art . . . at once purveys and challenges ideology—but always self-consciously.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite its “emancipatory intentionality,” to use Abensour’s term, *The Dispossessed*’s Anarres also cannot escape cooperating with the structures of power it opposes, and complicitous critique informs the utopian planet even at its earliest historical origins, with an anarchist uprising on another planet named Urras. Faced with a growing rebellion by dissidents fed up with inequality and injustice, Urras staved off revolution by “giving the Moon to

the International Society of Odonians [the rebels]—*buying them off* with a world, before they totally undermined the authority of law and national sovereignty.”<sup>22</sup> Sabotaging law would seem to have been the anarchists’ foremost goal. Instead, they negotiated. Odonian anarchists repudiate money, credit, debt, and profit in principle, but the language used to describe their exchange with their oppressors is that of bribery and selling out. The rebels were literally bought off. They compromised a momentous anarcho-communist movement for a “gift” from capitalists (as if there could be such a thing). This bargain exchanged mounting global revolution for the questionable insurance of a “meager,” if sometimes nearly impossible, existence on the ecologically “barren, arid, and inchoate” moon of Anarres.<sup>23</sup> A relatively free society comes into existence, but a larger population is left behind on Urras to continued exploitation. Therefore, at its inception, Anarres engages Hutcheon’s “strange” postmodernist critique; the utopia is “bound up . . . with its own *complicity* with power and domination.”

Complicity continues to inform Anarres as it maintains trade relations with Urras, exchanging its rich metal resources for much-needed fuels, fauna, and select manufactured goods: “[Urras] brought fossil oils and petroleum products, certain delicate machine parts and electronic components that Anarresti manufacturing was not geared to supply, and often a new strain of fruit tree or grain for testing. They took back to Urras a full load of mercury, copper, aluminum, uranium, tin, and gold.” The narrator explains that supporting Urras’s system of profit and exploitation in order to survive amounts to “a perpetually renewed humiliation” for Anarres: “the Free World of Anarres was a mining colony of Urras.”<sup>24</sup> Urras’s “gift” has become a debt that will never be paid down. To my knowledge, this complicity has not been considered in any of the utopian studies readings of *The Dispossessed*. For example, Ferns writes that “it is clear that the goal of the Odonian revolution . . . was, not the seizure of power, but rather the dismantling . . . of the mechanisms whereby power is exercised.”<sup>25</sup> Many utopian inhabitants of Anarres might wish that Ferns’s assessment were true, but the novel clearly does not endorse such an easy opposition between power and its dismantling—neither at the planet’s origins nor in its ongoing development.

Desire’s complicity with domination in the novel is further brought to the fore by Anarres’s ecology. In addition to entering the dialogue on post-modern politics asserted by thinkers such as Hutcheon and Abensour, *The*

*Dispossessed* can be read as an examination of the environmentalist discourses of sacrifice, scarcity, and economy that coalesced into a veritable political movement in the 1970s. Published in 1974, the novel appeared alongside many new “green” landmarks, including the emergence of ecological utopian (or ecotopian) literature.<sup>26</sup> Despite being embedded in this environmentally engaged climate and adopting its major environmentalist principles—the phrases “limits to growth” and a “blueprint for survival” being unmistakably apropos—the majority of critical readings tackle *The Dispossessed*’s utopianism and not its ecotopianism.<sup>27</sup> This is a significant exclusion since ecotopian literature’s foregrounding of ecology, as Marius de Geus and others argue, challenges common assumptions about utopian literature. Far-reaching definitions such as Raymond Williams’s “willed transformation” or Levitas’s description of utopian desire no longer seem like universal standards in the face of environmental crisis. Williams argues that modern utopias are no longer “discovered, come across, or projected” as their predecessors were; instead, they are “fought for,” “[lying] at the far end of generations of struggle and of fierce and destructive conflict.”<sup>28</sup> Here enduring temporary hardship promises future freedom, material abundance, and the fulfillment of desire. To this economy of sacrifice, Levitas contributes a definition of utopian desire as “the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved . . . the imagining of a state of the world in which *the scarcity gap is closed*.”<sup>29</sup> Together, Williams and Levitas describe utopia as a return on an investment, a promise fulfilled after a price has been paid.

In contrast, in green utopias, sacrifice is not a temporary but an ongoing prerequisite for survival. The “scarcity gap” cannot be closed. As Lisa Garforth explains, ecotopias assume “a *much less giving nature*” and seek to “[replace] nature’s taken-for-granted domination and exploitation with a utopia of environmental collaboration and caution.” In *The Dispossessed*, Anarres’s scant native vegetation, frequent droughts, and lack of animal life make it clear that the only way to avert disaster is through careful planning, vigilant resource conservation, arduous labor, and the fulfillment of only the most basic human needs—a system of regulation that many characters regard as an oppressive blueprint of how they should live their lives. Every citizen is conditioned to sacrifice her or his individual desires for the community in exchange for a modest, if sometimes painful, existence. Whereas the typical utopian

economy of sacrifice promises infinite happiness and prosperity in exchange for short-lived troubles, the ecotopia is restricted by the environment: it “*prescribes* economic limits—the ‘no-growth’ or ‘stable-state’ economy—and a *dramatic reduction in material wants* as the basis for ecological security and an expansion of human well-being.”<sup>30</sup>

In *The Dispossessed*, the utopian ideal of unlimited freedom comes into conflict with the sacrifices demanded by Anarres’s “blueprint for survival.” This tension not only challenges Williams’s and Levitas’s definitions of modern utopia; it encapsulates a fundamental problem of environmentalism today. “The Green Movement,” Andrew Dobson explains, is “faced with the difficulty of simultaneously calling into question a major aspiration of most people—maximizing consumption of material objects—and making its position attractive.” As a result, appeals for sacrifice require “careful negotiation.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, what many people want may not be immediately compatible with what is ecologically sustainable. For environmentalism to “make its position attractive,” it constructs an economy of sacrifice in which the surrender of certain pleasures and comforts is treated as an investment, with the returns outweighing the costs. Environmentalism must engage promises—one might say utopian promises—to rationalize why sacrifice is worth it. As Steven Yearley explains, “Greens” argue that “we must lower our expectations . . . [but that] this will not be a deprivation for us . . . because the simpler life brings its own communal and spiritual dividends.”<sup>32</sup> In the spirit of Abensour’s new utopia, *The Dispossessed* examines this guarantee by unfolding its logic on Anarres, leading to a number of questions central to both utopian studies and environmental thinking: How does one imagine a utopia based on desire and freedom and devoid of political outline when ecological scarcity demands a needs-based organization of resources to ensure survival? How does a green, sustainable society educate desire when, as Garforth puts it, “a dramatic reduction in material wants” must be “prescribed”? In such a context, who or what defines scarcity, and who or what monitors these prescriptions?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to trace the roots of Anarres’s sustainability ethics in the philosophy of Laia Odo. Although Odo lived and died on Urras’s ecologically abundant habitat, full of verdant forests teeming with wildlife, her work considered nature an efficient economy, with no waste, no surplus, in which every being has a proper function. On planet

Earth, a similar view dates back to eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's "Oeconomy of Nature," which treated nature as a system of harmony, order, and propriety. Donald Worster explains that in Linnaeus's perspective "every creature has its 'allotted place,' which is both its location in space and its function or work. . . . No conceivable place stands empty; each has its specialist, equipped to perform its function with skill and dispatch."<sup>33</sup> Somehow, despite her surroundings, Odo came up with a similar conclusion. The most rewarding life for humans, she argued, would be one of sacrifice and simplicity. Such a lifestyle would engender cooperation, freedom, and happiness. (Note the utopian promises.) Her book titles demonstrate the logical leap between the ecological and the social: one is called *The Analogy*, and the other, *The Social Organism*. The Anarresti follow Odo's organicist thinking. She is, after all, the ideological founder of their anarchist movement, and they take their planet's paucity of resources as the organizing principle for their society. Comments taken from Odo's Urrasti-produced works become mottos of Anarresti life, such as "Excess is excrement" and "Excrement retained in the body is a poison."<sup>34</sup> With conditions of survival tenuous, Anarresti citizens accept that the human body and the body politic must work analogously, that any excess will kill them, and that all individuals must be "functions analyst[s]."<sup>35</sup> As in Linnaeus's natural economy, each individual on Anarres fulfills his or her ecological niche, his or her "allotted place"; every being is a "specialist, equipped to perform its function with skill and dispatch."<sup>36</sup>

Odo's organicism, her integration of nature and culture, extends beyond activities with direct ecological implications. As the narrator explains, "The principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly."<sup>37</sup> The Anarresti are called to sacrifice the desire not only for material abundance but for symbolic forms of capital too. Communal solidarity is so valued that keeping anything to oneself, from power to products, is sacrilege because privacy is considered to be a form of personal property: "property was private."<sup>38</sup> The narrator explains that privacy itself "was not functional. It was excess, waste . . . for those who accepted the privilege and obligation of human solidarity, privacy was a value only where it served a function."<sup>39</sup> The nonprivacy involved in this entirely public, communitarian society disallows the accumulation of capital of any kind. Even the symbolic power or psychic gratification involved in



attracting attention to oneself is frowned upon: “Don’t egoize” is a favorite reprimand used to disavow such feelings of self-importance. Idiomatic language reflects this ethic. One does not say, “‘This one is mine and that’s yours’ in Pravic” but, rather, “I use this one and you use that.”<sup>40</sup> And the protagonist’s wife, Takver, uses the label “body profiteers” for women who “[use] their sexuality as a weapon in a power struggle within men.”<sup>41</sup> To deviate from this social ethic, to own and exchange rather than share and use together, is to be called some of the worst names in the Anarresti language: a propertarian, a usurer, or a profiteer, the last being “the most contemptuous word in [the Pravic] vocabulary.”<sup>42</sup>

The penetration of functionalism and organicism into all facets of life, from primary education to childhood socialization to sexual relations, blurs ecological scarcity with other socially constructed scarcities, making any act that does not comply with this vision, whether ecologically significant or not, a violation of an unwritten law. As a result, Anarres organizes itself through a type of blueprint, enacted not through legal force or explicit rules but through a moral discourse that makes certain ways of being seem natural, in effect restricting what can be said and known about the world. Most Anarresti trust that they have found a natural and “good society”; they are enthusiastic about their utopia, unaware of how its subtle laws mold their desires. Any disappointment is aimed at nature, not society, so change cannot be imagined. As the protagonist, Shevek, explains, “It’s not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It’s the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn’t meant to support civilization. If we let one another down, if we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us.”<sup>43</sup> In this regard, Anarres achieves the utopian state promised by modern environmentalist discourses of sacrifice, a state in which the whole of society embraces material relinquishment as an investment in the future. In so doing, *The Dispossessed*’s utopia overcomes the seemingly impossible task (if we let history be the judge) outlined by Dobson: convincing people that the pleasures and comforts associated with the “consumption of material objects” are incompatible with sustainability—and perhaps incompatible with happiness too, if we are to believe Bill McKibben’s 2007 book *Deep Economy*.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to relying on sacrifice as the axis between environmental ethics and ecological doom, *The Dispossessed* further suggests that its SF

world relates to the modern ecological crisis, at least in the U.S. context, by weaving the Anarresti nature discourse with American sociohistorical understandings of nature. In its narrative of self-conception, Anarres articulates its origins in terms reminiscent of U.S. frontier mythology, which has informed American environmentalism and its primary preoccupation, until quite recently, with preserving wilderness, that is, “empty” tracts of land supposedly untouched by humans.<sup>45</sup> This myth imagined the New World as an inexhaustible land of fertility and this abundance as the prerequisite to democracy, equality, and freedom. In his influential 1782 essay “What Is an American?” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur distinguished the New World’s “asylum” with the “thousands of acres” of “uncultivated lands” from the Old World, where “great lords . . . possess every thing, and a herd of people . . . have nothing.”<sup>46</sup> In the refuge of the “New World,” Crèvecoeur promised, “Go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful and industrious.”<sup>47</sup> *The Dispossessed* reconfigures this frontier-based environmentalism by shifting its mythological structure from the howling wilderness to Anarres’s “howling desert.” Like the earliest European settlers and colonizers of North America, the Anarresti are described as a “breed who had denied their past, their history. The Settlers of Anarres had turned their backs on the Old World and its past, opted for the future only.”<sup>48</sup> Moylan also relates Anarres’s scarce ecology to frontier mythology and, additionally, to U.S. experiences of environmental collapse: “It’s as though Le Guin combined the Oklahoma dust bowl of the 1930s with the ecology of the high desert of the southwest.” In this “unpastoral environment,” the small Anarresti population savors the freedom it finds in local, sustainable, and natural economy: it is “a frontier society which values minimal government, individual freedom, and locally exercised power, production, and consumption.”<sup>49</sup>

So why would Le Guin take a philosophy of nature and organicism, which the Anarresti so badly need to guide them in extreme ecological scarcity, and make it a foreign import? Why take a mainstay of ecotopian literature, the positing of ongoing sacrifices as the basis of utopia, and code it as nonindigenous, somehow unnatural—of another planet even? And why, in a moment of ecological crisis, both in the novel’s and in the 1970s political atmosphere, would Le Guin suggest that the environmentalist discourse of sacrifice, a discourse that reveals the excess and waste produced by modernity, might order desire in a way that has nothing to do with survival?

Whatever Le Guin's intentions, *The Dispossessed* makes a critical contribution to discussions in utopian studies and environmental thought today. To Abensour's question—"At what moment, at . . . what nodal point does human emancipation auto-destroy and turn itself into its opposite?"—*The Dispossessed* suggests the following reply: the autodestruction of utopia occurs at the point when a certain way of life or a particular way of thinking and speaking about that life begins to seem *natural*. Naturalizing anything closes down creativity and desiring "otherwise" (*autrement*). Discourses of nature—both ecological nature and the more general sense of what just seems "normal"—are the levers that both control and liberate in *The Dispossessed*: "nature" can remind you to sacrifice and to limit consumption to save the earth and its inhabitants, but nature can also force you to give too much or unnecessarily.

The ambiguity of Anarresti citizens' relationship to "nature" (both as ecology and as discourse) reflects the contradictory relationship that every subject has to structures of power—even when ecological survival is not at stake. If we agree that the subject is constructed by discourses and power external to itself—children, for example, gendered to be female/feminine or male/masculine or the Anarresti socialized to be minimalist, functionalist, and nonprivate at the core of their being—then the subject's existence is marked by what Judith Butler calls a "fundamental vulnerability": "Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent."<sup>50</sup> A child who identifies as a boy recognizes his "essence" through performances of masculinity and manliness, performances that do not intrinsically arise from his own being but that he incorporated into his being from his surrounding culture. Who this child becomes is indissociable from who his culture tells him he is and must be. Coming into existence involves an original submission to authority, and this submission persists as the child looks to the powers that shaped him for continued affirmation of his life.

For the Anarresti, subject formation—or "subjection," as Michel Foucault called it—gains ecological significance.<sup>51</sup> An episode in the early education of the protagonist reveals how normalized processes of subjection are doubly naturalized in an organicist society. As a child, Shevek displays his intelligence (perhaps even his genius) in a school activity called "Speaking-and-Listening," a nonproprietary, nonegoistic version of show-and-tell. However,

the “director” in control cannot understand Shevek’s sophisticated inquiry about physics and becomes offended by his precocious student. With “an assertion of authority,” he admonishes Shevek for exhibiting improper Anarresti values: “Speech is sharing—a cooperative art. You’re not sharing, merely egoizing. . . . This kind of thing is really directly contrary to what we’re after in a Speaking-and-Listening group. Speech is a two-way function.” Turning to the class, the director explains, “Shevek isn’t ready to understand that yet, as most of you are, and so his presence is disruptive.” Shevek is asked to leave his group as punishment, and he walks away from “the [children’s] circle,” ostracized.<sup>52</sup> By “telling” rather than “sharing,” by owning his idea, he challenged the definitive way of Anarresti being, a way of being that seems so completely natural that it is endorsed by ecology itself (or at least ecology as it is understood). To push at this limitation is to become unintelligible, unthinkable, a nonsubject, a body that does not matter (to use another Butler phrase). No longer an Anarresti, such a person becomes a propertarian, a usurer, or a profiteer. Shevek enters a space of exclusion. Using Butler’s terms, one could say that Shevek is entitled to less affirmation and protection until he realizes that in order to belong, to survive, he must change to fit in the proper “categories, terms, and names” that are “the sign[s] of [his] own [ecological] existence.”<sup>53</sup> Not only does this self-modification seem natural (as the proper, accepted social behavior), it is Natural (as the only means to ecological survival).

Such vulnerability is not the experience only of those who break from the fold as Shevek did in grade school. Even when playing it safe, the subject, Butler argues, is always “an exploitable kind of being”: “If the very production of the subject and the formation of that will are the consequences of a primary subordination, then the vulnerability of the subject to a power not of its own making is unavoidable.”<sup>54</sup> In *The Dispossessed*, this susceptibility figures through the Odonian discourse of scarcity that makes life possible on Anarres; it conditions its subjects to accept absolute dispossession and sacrifice as the condition of their freedom, as the condition of utopia. As Shevek warned above, “If we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us.”<sup>55</sup> This threat renders every Anarresti vulnerable by making one way of being so organic that it is beyond debate. That is, there is only one sure path to utopia on their planet: through an all-pervasive functionalism. In Butler’s account, such “epistemological certainties,” or total faith that one has found the truth of

being, “turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering.”<sup>56</sup> Other ways of being become off-limits. On Anarres, questioning of the prevailing values becomes a virtually criminal act, leading to social ostracism, which, in a communal society, has severe consequences. This is not to say that material excess and waste are viable options, especially in a place as ecologically unreliable as Anarres (or on Earth for that matter). Rather, what *The Dispossessed* suggests is that the “epistemological certainties” that makes the Anarres utopia possible can also turn it into a dystopian place. But how is one to distinguish between genuine and necessary calls for sacrifice, on the one hand, and the mobilization of sacrifice in manipulations of knowledge and power, on the other? How does one know when scarcity and survival are invoked to control and mislead? Here appear Abensour’s dialectic of emancipation and Le Guin’s singular contribution to postmodern theory and utopian studies, to understanding how promises of liberation collapse into forces of oppression.

In *The Dispossessed*, the vulnerability of subjects to the powers that shape them is staged most clearly through the censorship of “excessive” professions of the imagination—art, music, and intellectual inquiry—activities without clear ecological function yet nonetheless central to freedom and democracy in every human civilization. As Jacques Derrida articulates, literature and art “[give] *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history.”<sup>57</sup> Yet the rule-breaking freedoms of artistic and intellectual production are superfluous in a society organized by ecological needs, where the focus is in producing enough resources to feed, shelter, and clothe a populace. In fact, creative practices may dangerously divert from this goal by misdirecting desires toward inessential ends or toward no end at all. Tirin, a composer who writes music characterized by disharmony, figures the disconnection between Anarresti functionalism and artistic “excess.” He describes his work: “Five instruments each playing an independent cyclic theme; no melodic causality. It makes a lovely harmony. But they don’t hear it. They won’t hear it. They can’t!” The Production and Distribution Coordination, which handles labor and resource distribution, apparently extends its discourse of naturalized sacrifice and utility to aesthetics, and since Tirin’s “dysfunctional music” violates the values of cooperation and solidarity,

he gets no work doing what he loves. Instead, he continually receives manual labor assignments where his energy can be more usefully spent on the planet's survival. Is it not reasonable that when natural resources are insufficient, Tirin's ecologically dysfunctional music becomes expendable, even a drain on the community, and especially since his work disrupts the very ideological system that makes his and others' lives possible? What if he inspired others to enjoy disequilibrium and destabilization? What kind of destruction would result? As Bedap, a friend, explains sardonically, "Music isn't useful. Canal digging is important . . . music's mere decoration." Salas concurs, echoing Bedap's sarcasm: "It's not in the Organic Style."<sup>58</sup>

Shevek suffers a similar fate. His research deals with instantaneous time-space communication, which would enable the intergalactic exchange of ideas. However, his adviser, Sabul, deems this information nonvital to planetary survival, and other Anarres leaders support his decision, for they fear communication with foreign entities lest it lead others to question their strict functionalist lifestyles (what if, during the sensitive socialization period of youth, young students saw the pleasures of excess, realized that they were not so "excremental" after all? Would the result be some temporary hedonism—or total ecological disaster?). During a drought, Shevek's academic post is eliminated, and his latest research cannot be printed. Sabul informs him of the reason: "Paper's at minimum ration. No nonessential printing."<sup>59</sup> And he explains that employing Shevek to do physics "doesn't get bread into people's mouths"; such work is "without *social organic utility*."<sup>60</sup> Shevek initially accepts the necessity of his dismissal. It seems natural: there is a drought, and sacrifice is what allows Anarres to sustain itself on a land thought inhospitable to humans, a planet given away by capitalists.

Eventually, though, he begins to connect his termination with the quarrels he had with his academic superior; he remembers how Sabul demanded that he be named as a co-author of Shevek's research: "It occurred to him once that Sabul wanted to keep the new Urrasti physics *private*—to own it, as a property, a source of power over his colleagues on Anarres."<sup>61</sup> His conclusion is stalled, though, when his proper subjectivity reasserts itself, and he falls back on an "epistemological certainty," the Anarresti "way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering" (to use Butler's terms again). His own reasoning repulses him: "This idea was so counter to Shevek's habits of thinking that *it had great difficulty getting itself*

clear in his mind, and when it did *he suppressed it at once, with contempt, as a genuinely disgusting thought.*"<sup>62</sup> Educated to repudiate all possessions and any desire for power or symbolic capital, Shevek is convinced that Anarres has "no power structure," and he struggles to develop the skills to break through the foreclosure of alternative ways of being, thinking, and desiring.<sup>63</sup> Not until his new labor posts on the other side of the planet split him from his wife and child does he slowly realize that scarcity can silence not only research but his dissenting voice: "It appeared to him that the drought might after all be of service to the social organism. The priorities were becoming clear again. Weaknesses, soft spots, sick spots would be scoured out. Sluggish organs restored to full function, the fat would be trimmed off the body politic."<sup>64</sup> Likewise, social ecologist Murray Bookchin warns that needs-based environmentalism can sanction abuses of power by moving covertly from the realm of the so-called natural to the social: "There is a point at which society begins to intervene in the formation of needs to produce a very special type of scarcity: a *socially* induced scarcity."<sup>65</sup> For Shevek, the ideology that freed him from ecological destitution and taught him how to be also works against him, making his freedoms of thought, desire, and expression dangerous to the social order.

*The Dispossessed* does not lead its reader to this dialectic of emancipation to perform the task literary utopian studies so often advocates. Through the juxtaposition of oppositional social forces, the novel does not propose that the education of desire will automatically escape the tendency of utopian promises to totalize and dominate. Rather, *The Dispossessed* explores how discourses of liberation—here, ecological liberation—naturalize certain ways of being and foreclose others. Le Guin's novel performs the work of Abensour's new utopian spirit by first identifying one of the possible "blind spots that carry out the reversal of modern emancipation" and then by deconstructing this vulnerability "so that a new path opens for utopia."<sup>66</sup> Along the way, *The Dispossessed* even proposes some theories as to how this dialectic operates in the context of ecological scarcity. Shevek's friend Bedap initially claims that the problem is human indolence: "It's always easier not to think for oneself. Find a nice safe hierarchy and settle in. Don't make changes, don't risk disapproval. . . . It's always easiest to let yourself be governed."<sup>67</sup> But in another, more thoughtful moment, Bedap suggests that blaming ignorance oversimplifies the problem, and he acknowledges that the Anarresti are in the position of Butler's "fundamental vulnerability." That is, they are complicit

with the powers that govern them in order to survive on their barren planet; living within nature's economic limits brings with it an unavoidable susceptibility to domination. He explains, "Function demands expertise and a stable institution. But that stability gives *scope* to the authoritarian impulse."<sup>68</sup> Ecological limits require expertise, and this expertise is what makes utopia on Anarres possible. However, expert resource management, organization, rationality, and knowledge provide "scope," an opportunity or even a purpose, to authority, hierarchy, property, and power. The resulting "power structure," Bedap explains, is an "unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind."<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

Abensour's dialectic of emancipation, the "paradoxical movement" between freedom and oppression, operates less as paradox and more as continuum in *The Dispossessed*, a continuum between ecological survival and the authoritarianism that inhabits any claim to know the right or "natural" way of being. Utopian studies' rush to rescue utopia from its association with totalizing blueprints has failed to account for such complicitous, continuous relationships between utopian promises and forces of domination. Intertwining survival and vulnerability on the ecologically scarce Anarres, *The Dispossessed* shows how, in green utopia, desire is always already complicit in a plan, a matrix of knowledge and power: the programming of desire may be liberatory and save a community from environmental catastrophe, but it simultaneously renders its subjects susceptible to the governing of thought that "forecloses alternative possibilities" of being. Rather than simply fleeing blueprints, the education of desire in Abensour and Le Guin constitutes a critical relationship to the program implicit in any claim to knowledge, progress, and freedom. To educate desire is to teach how utopian promises of freedom can lead to new forms of domination as desire is arranged and rearranged by power and discourse.

Critically examining this relationship requires—to use the title of an Abensour article—"thinking utopia otherwise" (*autrement*). Weaving together the language of Emmanuel Levinas with his own concepts, Abensour argues that utopia disrupts what seems conceptually or historically probable and familiar: "Utopia belongs neither to the order of understanding nor to that



of knowledge . . . but to the register of the encounter.” For Levinas, the encounter is a relationship based not on knowledge but on a relation to alterity, to the other’s “incomparable singularity.”<sup>70</sup> It is the moment when the subject is confronted by this otherness, and ethics is the welcoming of the resistance to knowledge and the vulnerability that this meeting entails.<sup>71</sup> Drawing on the ambiguous Greek etymology of the term *utopia*—both “no place” (*ou-topos*) and “the good place” (*eu-topos*)—Abensour insists that utopia is forever unlocatable, and necessarily so. Utopia invokes “place” (*topos*) but must remain a “nowhere” that keeps watch over its reduction to a knowable entity, to any claim that it can take the shape of a specific place, narrative, or form. Much like Levinasian ethics, the new utopian spirit calls for an imagination of utopia that would disrupt what is known, how it is known, and the power that is invested in knowing anything; it calls for an imagination of utopia that upsets “the opposition of the rulers and the ruled, toward the eradication of the relations of command and obedience . . . utopias, in all their diversity, in all their eccentricity, [must] become an integral part of the democratic debate . . . [and] make the issue of social alterity appear in a thousand different forms.”<sup>72</sup> And when any one of those thousand forms of alterity begins to take shape and inevitably creates its own laws, when someone or something purports to know utopia and how to create it, the education of desire proposes yet another thousand.<sup>73</sup>

*The Dispossessed* concludes similarly by suggesting that utopia is not Anarres—or any other “good” society or place for that matter. For Shevek, utopia instead becomes a critical relation to the dialectic of emancipation. Some critics have called the novel a Bildungsroman, referring to Shevek’s intellectual commitment to rethinking his faith in Odonianism, his resistance to the PDC’s powerful “knowledgeable” authority, and his experimentation with the spaces of freedom he finds within Anarres society. He founds his own printing syndicate with his wife and colleagues, engages in information exchange with Urrasti physicists interested in his work, and travels to Urras to find out if the individual freedoms promised under the capitalist and ecological abundance truly exist. (They don’t.) In short, Shevek begins negotiating with the mechanisms that form the conditions of his ecological emancipation as well as his oppression. Even when some of his efforts prove disappointing, Shevek commits himself to living and working with Anarres despite its flaws. He is complicitous with the anarchist planet’s failures, for

he owes his existence to its rules, yet he strives nonetheless to transform his society by interrupting its programs and reinvigorating desire without law: "That the Odonian society on Anarres had fallen short of the ideal did not, in his eyes, lessen his responsibility to it."<sup>74</sup> After facing the paradox of emancipation and utopia, that is, the collapse of promises of freedom into forces of domination, our protagonist embarks on a project of reenergizing his planet's imagination without any specific goals. He plans "to shake up things, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like [an anarchist]!"<sup>75</sup> His desire contains Abensour's educative aspect, destabilizing Anarres's comfortable arrangements and exposing its subtle laws. As Abensour explains, embedded in knowing what is best for all, utopia is woven into the order of power, and if Anarres experiences shaky ground, persistent questions, and broken habits, its utopia might become "detached from the order of knowledge [*savoir*], and therefore the order of power."<sup>76</sup>

In *The Dispossessed*, freedom, utopia, ethics, and democracy are not crystallized conditions. Even if Anarresti society tries to freeze them into place, the novel presents them as processes that cannot be submitted to a static entity. Ecological sustainability receives the same treatment. For environmentalism, which, like any form of politics, can resort to prescriptions and utopian promises of freedom, *The Dispossessed* leaves the following, cautionary message: "Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, *the essential function of life*."<sup>77</sup> Even with the exact parameters of sacrifice and compromise unclear in the text, this statement calls for the individual not to lower his or her standards—"never compromise"—in exchange for what seems safe and knowable. Unlike compromise, which entails settling for less than what one wanted, reaching agreement and resolution, sacrifice, the text suggests, preserves space for revision, choice, and ultimately vitality. This distinction speaks to a paradox within the environmental movement today as Michael Zimmerman sees it: "Many radical ecologists have charged that [the environmental] crisis arises from modernity's obsession with control and power. But since [these critics] themselves were raised within and are thus inevitably influenced by modernity, questions arise as to whether they are sufficiently free from this control obsession, and

whether—in attempting to save nature from further destruction—they will repeat the errors that undermined modernity’s positive emancipatory aims and led to such ecological destruction.”<sup>78</sup> In Anarres, this impulse toward social control usurps the individual’s freedom to choose the meaning of functions, needs, and desires. This is Bookchin’s concern in *The Ecology of Freedom* when he writes that an environmentalism based on scarcity risks disallowing the individual “to define his or her needs in terms of *qualitative*, ecological, humanistic, indeed, philosophical criteria.” Bookchin argues that environmentalism be based on choice, not need, and imagine ways for humans to have enough natural resources not only to fulfill functions (as we saw on Anarres) but also to support the non-need-based activities that are essential to human life and freedom, such as “humanity’s obvious potentialities for producing a rich literary tradition, science, a sense of place, and a broad concept of shared humanity.”<sup>79</sup>

In the face of ecological shortages, Shevek welcomes Abensour’s infinite social alterities and embraces the unknown without “the expectation of ever stopping anywhere.”<sup>80</sup> At varying levels, the desires of the Anarresti subject will always comply with and be governed by the discourses defining the terms of its ecological existence, yet Shevek fosters a critical attitude of the sort defined by Foucault: that is, “the art of not being governed so much,” which asks, “How not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them?”<sup>81</sup> As with Abensour’s education of desire, there are no guarantees in this enterprise. At the conclusion of the text, Shevek returns from his travels to Urras, committed to uncertainty. The novel ends just as he steps off his spaceship back home. With words that Abensour might stand by, Le Guin writes, “Nobody is quite sure what happens next. . . . Freedom is never very safe.”<sup>82</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xi.
2. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 35; emphasis added.

3. Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time: The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 90; emphasis added.

4. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 8, 191, 199.

5. Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 231; emphasis added.

6. For a comprehensive look at Abensour's contribution to political philosophy, see Martin Breugh, "Critique de la domination, pensée de l'émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour," *Politique et Sociétés* 22, no. 3 (2003): 45–69. Breugh places Abensour at the origins of the reemergence of French political philosophy alongside figures like Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet.

7. Even though an English translation of Abensour's seminal essay on the education of desire in Morris appeared in 1999, critics still access his ideas through Williams via Thompson ("Romanticism, Moralism and Utopianism: The Case of William Morris," *New Left Review* 99 [September–October 1976]: 83–111), merely dropping his name as they define their arguments with his words. Levitas has so taken up the concept of the "education of desire" with such little credit to Abensour that it is not uncommon to find scholars who think she coined the term. (For a recent example, see Rob Latham's review essay, "A Tendentious Tendency in SF Criticism," *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 1 [March 2002], at [www.depauw.edu/sfs/review\\_essays/latham86.htm](http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review_essays/latham86.htm)). As late as 2005, Levitas was relying on E. P. Thompson's thirty-year-old gloss on Abensour to posit her theory of utopia. See her University of Bristol Inaugural Lecture: Ruth Levitas, "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Or Why Sociologists and Others Should Take Utopia More Seriously," University of Bristol Inaugural Lecture, Bristol, October 24, 2005, at [www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/staff/inaugural.doc](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/staff/inaugural.doc). Other prominent utopian studies figures such as Darko Suvin and Krishan Kumar have followed suit. Their mentions are brief, but they demonstrate the permeation of the name "Abensour" throughout Anglo-American utopian studies without any reference to Abensour's actual written work. See Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (New York: Routledge, 2003), 187–202; and

Kumar's introduction to William Morris, *News From Nowhere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Thompson's one-sentence translation has also provided inspiration for work in other fields, e.g., Harvey Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

8. Miguel Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," in *L'utopie en questions*, ed. Michèle Riot-Sarcey (Saint-Denis, France: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2001), 245–56, at 248. All translations of Abensour's untranslated works are my own. Otherwise, I cite the English translations and modify them when necessary. See also Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

9. Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 248.

10. Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," trans. Max Blechman, in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), 126–61, at 127.

11. Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 246.

12. For example, Moylan writes, "Utopian narrative is first and foremost a process. Utopia cannot be reduced to the society imaged, to 'utopia' constructed by the author . . . utopia cannot be reduced to its *content*. To do so would be to cut short the process and limit utopia to a closed set of images, character activities, or ideological expressions. . . . Utopia is not to be regarded as an ideal blueprint or system" (*Demand the Impossible*, 39; emphasis added).

13. Abensour, "William Morris," 128–30.

14. *Ibid.*, 145–46; emphasis added.

15. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 40; emphasis added.

16. Miguel Abensour, "Le nouvel esprit utopique," *Cahiers Bernard Lazare* 128–30 (1991): 132–63, at 138.

17. Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

18. Ruth Levitas, "For Utopia: The (Limits of the) Utopian Function in Late Capitalist Society," in *The Philosophy of Utopia*, ed. Barbara Goodwin (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 25–43, at 35, 38; emphasis added.

19. I take the phrase "ecological emancipation" from social ecologist Murray Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom*, in which it refers to the state of having a more-than-adequate supply of natural resources, the condition of

culture: "Without a sufficiency in the means of life, life itself is impossible, and without a certain excess in these means, life is degraded to a cruel struggle for survival" (*The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, rev. ed. [Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991], 67).

20. Peter Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1986), 140; Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10–11; Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 23; Laurence Davis, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin," in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Dispossessed"*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005), 3–36, at 31. Indeed, many critics take Le Guin's original subtitle, "An Ambiguous Utopia," as an endorsement of this interpretation even though this label was later inexplicably dropped—perhaps because it is redundant: all utopias are ambiguous or, to use Abensour's terminology, "dialectical."

21. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1, 4.

22. Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974; New York: First Perennial Classics, 2003), 94; emphasis added.

23. *Ibid.*, 65.

24. *Ibid.*, 92.

25. Chris Ferns, "Future Conditional or Future Perfect? *The Dispossessed* and the Permanent Revolution," in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Dispossessed"*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005), 249–62, at 251.

26. These environmentalist landmarks include the first Earth Day celebration in 1970 and the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, the first world environmental summit. The United States, in 1970–73, accomplished the following watersheds (many of which are now significantly dismantled): the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the banning of DDT, and the ratification of several U.S. environmental-protection laws, including the Endangered Species Act and significant amendments to the Clean Air Act. Influential books calling for alternative lifestyles to save the planet and new assessments of capitalism's expansionist ethic included Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971), the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), and E. F. Schumacher's

*Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) as well as periodicals still around today, such as *Mother Earth News* and *The Ecologist*, which released its manifesto, “Blueprint for Survival,” calling for sustainability, steady-state economy, population control, and new approaches to technology, in 1972.

27. Werner Christie Mathiesen’s “The Underestimation of Politics in Green Utopias: The Description of Politics in Huxley’s *Island*, Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, and Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*” (*Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies* 12, no. 1 [2001]: 56–78) is one article that engages the text’s utopianism and environmentalism together. Despite the foregrounding of ecology in *The Dispossessed*, ecocritical readings of the novel are surprisingly scant. Exceptions include Tonia L. Payne’s “‘Home Is a Place Where You Have Never Been’: Connections With the Other in Ursula Le Guin’s Fiction” (*AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 96 [2001]: 189–206); Barry Pegg’s “Down to Earth: Terrain, Territory, and the Language of Realism in Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*” (*Michigan Academician* 27, no. 4 [1995]: 481–92); Peter G. Stillman’s “*The Dispossessed* as Ecological Political Theory” (in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Dispossessed,”* ed. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman [Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005], 55–74); and Patrick D. Murphy’s brief treatment in “The Non-alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism” (in *Beyond Nature Writing*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001], 263–78). This is all the more surprising because of Le Guin’s status as a nature writer, included as she was by Charlotte Zoë Walker in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 275: *Twentieth-Century American Nature Writers: Prose* (ed. Roger Thompson and J. Scott Bryson [Detroit: Gale Research Group, 2003], 155–65). Other Le Guin works, especially *Always Coming Home*, have come under more ecocritical analysis. *The Dispossessed* is more often the subject of discussions of its anarchism, but these readings do not take into account the limits that ecology poses to both anarchy and utopia: see the “Anarchist Politics” section of Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman’s edited collection, *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Dispossessed”* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005). Another major source of Le Guin criticism comes from feminist thinkers, but *The Dispossessed* has not received much attention in this vein either despite its extended commentary on how economy shapes gender and sexuality.

28. Raymond Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction" (1978), in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 196–212, at 204.

29. Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 191; emphasis added.

30. Lisa Garforth, "Green Utopias: Beyond Apocalypse, Progress, and Pastoral," *Utopian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2005): 393–427, at 405; emphasis added.

31. Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 16, 73.

32. Steven Yearley, "Environmental Challenges," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 504–32, at 516.

33. Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 35.

34. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 98.

35. *Ibid.*, 264.

36. Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 35.

37. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 98.

38. *Ibid.*, 303.

39. *Ibid.*, 110–11.

40. *Ibid.*, 58.

41. *Ibid.*, 212–13.

42. *Ibid.*, 224.

43. *Ibid.*, 167.

44. Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007).

45. See William Cronon's "The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon [New York: W. W. Norton, 1996], 69–90), which argues that the affinity for wilderness at the heart of American environmentalism is far from "natural" and instead originates in U.S. colonialism.

46. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, "What Is an American?" (1782), in *Letters From an American Farmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42, 56, 40.

47. *Ibid.*, 66.

48. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 95, 89.

49. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 96.



50. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 20.

51. For Foucault's discussion of "subjection" (*assujettissement*), see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

52. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 29–30.

53. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 20.

54. Ibid.

55. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 167.

56. Judith Butler, "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih, with Judith Butler (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 302–22, at 307.

57. Jacques Derrida, "The Strange Institution Called Literature," interview with Derek Attridge, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33–75, at 37.

58. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 175.

59. Ibid., 239.

60. Ibid., 265, 238; emphasis added.

61. Ibid., 109–10.

62. Ibid., 110; emphasis added.

63. Ibid., 165.

64. Ibid., 262.

65. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 68.

66. Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 248.

67. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 168.

68. Ibid., 167; emphasis added.

69. Ibid., 165.

70. Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 254.

71. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

72. Miguel Abensour, "Le nouvel esprit utopique," *Cahiers Bernard Lazare* 128–30 (1991): 132–63, at 162.

73. Although Levinasian thinking inhabits much of his work, Abensour focuses on the role of utopia in Levinas's work in "To Think Utopia Otherwise," trans. Bettina Bergo, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20, no. 2/21, no. 1 (1998): 251–79.

- 74. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 333.
- 75. Ibid., 384.
- 76. Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 254.
- 77. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 333; emphasis added.
- 78. Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7.
- 79. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 67.
- 80. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 334.
- 81. Ibid., 28.
- 82. Ibid., 384.